

Don Bell's Column

Fortune Of A Gypsy (II)



Tell a person what nationality you are and he'll say "Oh, that's interesting," and perhaps ask a few polite questions. But say you're a Gypsy and all ears will point moonward, curiosity will simmer like rice on a low fire.

Everyone wants to know about the Gypsies. Little has been written about them. Few people know a Gypsy (although there are several thousand in Canada).

But since they have always been outcasts, living by a code opposite to that followed by an industrialized society, naturally they become objects of interest. Gypsies are, perhaps, what all of us want to be.

CBC Focus provided some of the answers about this ancient race last night in a superb program narrated by Ranko Lee, Canadian head of the World Romany Community.

Ranko Lee, whom I've known for some 10 years, is one of the most interesting persons anyone would want to meet. When he speaks, as was evident in last night's program, his sentences are charged with a simple wisdom and profundity.

It is to the credit of Jack Zolov, producer of Focus, and cameraman Hans Michel that they were able in half an hour to capture the flavored atmosphere of the Gypsy community, and to give such a marvellous portrayal of Ranko Lee, who, besides being intellectual leader of his community, is a novelist, poet, folklorist, author of an English to Romany dictionary and builder of models of ancient, fighting ships, some of which are supposed to be displayed in the World's Fair marine exhibition.

The beginning of the show was particularly effective. As the camera took random shots of Montreal Gypsies, Ranko's voice was heard low but purposeful:

"I am a Gypsy. I look like you. I dress like you. I work in the city. I don't wear ear-rings — yet, I'm different."

This set the tone for the rest of the show. Ranko went on to explain why he is different and it's worth taking up the space to quote him at some length.



RANKO LEE

"Some people think we are dangerous," Ranko said. "We are dangerous, yes. To tyranny in all its shapes and forms ... We shun Communists, we abhor Capitalism. We don't make good soldiers. We're accused of cowardice because we don't go to war. But the Gypsy realizes that as he pulls the trigger he could be killing a father, a brother, a lover, or perhaps even another Gypsy."

"The Gypsy recognizes that there is a difference between the laws of God, which we follow, and the laws of state, which can be altered at the whim of whoever wants to alter them . . .

"Many people say to me: Why don't you get a job like everyone else, especially since you're one of the few educated Gypsies? My answer is: If I got a job in an office, say, and someone made a comment about the heavyweight fight, where would I be? As a Gypsy, you take no interest in sports, unless you're personally involved. You take no interest in politics. You don't adhere to any religion. You can't say you're Scottish. So wherever you work it doesn't take long for everyone to realize that you're extremely different from them . . .

"Gypsy celebrations are far removed from the dull, sophisticated parties of most Canadians where everybody tries to impress everybody else while waiting for something to happen."

On his ships:

"I believe that a ship is a

reflection of a civilization. When you have a barbaric, cruel era, the ships are barbaric and cruel. When you have a robust, vital era, the ships are robust and vital. When the times are sedate or flamboyant, so are the ships. I hate to think that the crude efficiency of modern ships is a reflection of our era."

On The Gypsy in modern times:

"One of the greatest threats to Gypsy existence is that nomadism as a way of life is becoming outmoded. Few gypsies in North America work at the old trades, like fortunetelling, horse-trading, or as a tinker or coppersmith. The patriarchs of the Gypsy tribes who enforce the Romania—or the Gypsy code of ethics—are

becoming fewer and fewer. The whole Romany culture is undergoing a vast change. The ideal situation would be to integrate the Gypsy into the 20th century, but not to assimilate him."

On Gypsy beliefs:

"We believe in ghosts and goblins and the supernatural. We believe the angel of death visits us before the death of a relative. We fear and respect the full moon—it is a dangerous time."

On Gypsy customs:

"Having lived as nomads, Gypsies have quite different customs from ordinary people. One of these customs is to visit each other and to talk. And sometimes this is done even at the expense of turning off the TV set."

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